

**Edwards: Veterans, Military Construction Funding Passes House Under Final 2009 Bill Respects Service of Troops, Veterans, & Builds on Historic 2008 Funding Increases**

(Washington, DC)— U.S. Representative Chet Edwards announced that the House passed vital funding for Military Construction and Veterans under the final 2009 funding bill. The 2009 funding builds on the historic increases for veterans passed into law last year, the largest funding increase in the 77 year history of the Veterans Administration, and the new GI Bill of Rights passed into law earlier this year. The bill passed 370 to 58 and is expected to be signed into law by the President this week.

“This bill builds on the historic increases in the fiscal year 2008 bill and sends a clear message to America’s troops, veterans, and their families that we honor and respect their service and sacrifice,” said Edwards, Chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs. “With this bill, House Democrats will have done more to increase veterans funding in 2 years than Republicans did in 12 years. Democrats have kept our promise to America’s veterans. This bill is about maintaining a strong national defense, improving military readiness and respecting with word and deeds those veterans who defend us and our freedom.”

“This is about the moral responsibility of keeping our promises to those who have kept their promise to serve. It is about the young father in a wheelchair I met at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. He lost both of his legs in combat in Iraq. As he sat there talking to me with his young son in his lap, I could not help but be overwhelmed by the lifelong sacrifice this father had made to try to make the world a safer place for my two young sons and children everywhere. This bill is about seeing that that loving father doesn’t have to give up the dreams he has for his child. The humility of this bill is our knowing that we can never fully repay the debt of gratitude we owe this soldier, and all who have served in uniform to protect the American family.

“Honoring our troops, our veterans and their families in a meaningful way is not only the right thing to do. It is the smart thing to do. In an all-volunteer military force, the best in the world, we cannot expect to attract and retain the best and brightest if we do not provide quality housing, health care and education for our military troops and their families and if we do not keep the promises we have made to our veterans.” The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) said the funding in the bill, “sends a clear message to America’s veterans, service members and their families that Congress recognizes and appreciates their service to this country and the sacrifices they have made on its behalf.”

Overall, the bill totals \$118.9 billion and provides \$72.9 billion in discretionary spending, \$47.6 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs, \$25 billion for Military Construction, Family Housing and BRAC, and \$207.29 million for related agencies. It is \$3.6 billion more than the President’s request and \$9 billion more than the historic fiscal year 2008 bill.

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS: \$47.6 billion, \$4.5 billion above 2008 and \$2.8 billion

over the President's request, for veterans' medical care, claims processors, and facility improvements. Some notable provisions include:

- Veterans Health Administration: \$41 billion, \$1.8 billion over the President's request and \$4.1 billion above 2008, for veterans medical care. The Veterans Health Administration estimates they will treat more than 5.8 million patients in 2009 including more than 333,275 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan (40,000 more than 2008).
- Medical Services: \$30.97 billion, \$1.2 billion above the President's request and \$2.9 billion above 2008, to improve access to medical services for all veterans.
- Mental Health Care and Substance Abuse: Dedicate a minimum of \$3.8 billion, \$900 million more than 2008, to specialty mental health services for veterans with mental illness, PTSD, and for suicide prevention.
- Priority 8 Veterans: \$375 million to increase enrollment of Priority 8 (low to middle income) veterans by 10 percent;
- Mileage Reimbursement: \$133 million above the President's request to increase funding to raise the gas mileage reimbursement rate from 28.5 cents to 41.5 cents per mile for veterans traveling distances for care, and a freeze on the associated deductible;
- Claims Processors: Increased funding to hire 2,000 additional claims processors to work down the backlog of 390,000 benefits claims and to reduce the 6 month time to process new claims
- Rural Veterans: Rural Health Initiative: \$250 million to begin a rural health initiative to improve access to medical services for veterans living in rural areas.
- Prosthetics: \$1.6 billion, \$250 million above 2008 and \$116 million above the President's request, to provide veterans with appropriate prosthetic support and sensory aids given recent advances in technology.
- Homeless Veterans: \$130 million to provide the additional case workers and medical services needed for our homeless veterans; including \$30 million to hire additional personnel for the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Program

**MILITARY CONSTRUCTION:** \$25.0 billion, \$649 million above the President's request and \$4.4 billion above 2008. The increase is mostly due to the costs of implementing Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) and plans to increase the size of the Army and Marine Corps.

- 2005 Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) and Re-stationing: \$8.8 billion, \$1.5 billion above 2008, to implement base closures and realignments, and support the re-stationing of 70,000 troops and their families from overseas to the United States. The bill also funds planning for the eventual relocation of 8,000 marines and 9,000 dependents from Okinawa to Guam.
- Quality of Life Initiative: \$233 million, not requested by the President, to continue a quality of

life initiative for troops and their families started in the 2008 supplemental including: \$122 million for three new trainee and recruit housing facilities for the Army and Marine Corps to improve the barracks soldiers and marines live in when they train; and \$111 million for medical military construction and planning activities to upgrade substandard medical treatment facilities. For years, service members and their families have said that quality of life issues are their top priority, but they have been neglected by this Administration.

- Growing the Force: \$5.5 billion in military construction and family housing, to support the Administration's program to increase the size of the Army by 65,000, the Marine Corps by 27,000, and the Guard and Reserve by 9,200 personnel.

- Military Housing: \$3.2 billion, \$292 million above 2008, to further eliminate inadequate military housing.

In his first year as Chairman in 2007, Congressman Edwards authored historic increases of \$11.8 billion in veterans' health care and benefits, the largest increase in veterans funding in the 77-year history of the Veterans Administration.

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